

# Pacific Standard

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## TAX THE RICH AND BUILD THE TRAILS

User fees and other pay-to-play policies are a regressive scheme that won't fix our public lands. We should resist them.

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Public lands proponents everywhere are rightfully worried about the multi-billion-dollar deferred maintenance backlog that is plaguing the federal domain. The trails and roads that crisscross our national parks and forests are eroding, clogged with brush, or buried by fallen trees. Historic ranger stations, backcountry cabins, bridges, and other important facilities have descended into disrepair. Campgrounds and outhouses and water systems are dilapidated and in desperate need of a tune up. But there's not enough money to go around, and the problem is only getting worse.

The National Park Service alone is presently looking at \$12 billion in unfunded infrastructure backlog. The Forest Service, for its part, has a deferred maintenance need that hovers somewhere around \$5 billion. Meanwhile, the Trump administration has put forward a budget that proposes bone-deep cuts to these agencies and others like them. All this as the number of people who visit our parks and other public lands each year continues its steep upward climb, with the Park Service alone logging a record-breaking 330 million visitations in 2016.

All of these factors combined have led some to look for alternative funding models for the parks and forests and wildlife refuges that belong to all Americans. Consider, for instance, the "pay-to-play" model, which proposes the widespread adoption of user fees on public lands across the country. A few land management agencies, like the National Park Service and the United States Fish and Wildlife Service, have long charged entrance fees on some of their lands, though these fees are limited by both law and policy and are not universally implemented. (Glacier National Park, for instance, charges vehicles \$35 for a seven-day access pass on its land. Sleeping Bear Dunes National Park, in Michigan, charges \$15 for the same.) Other agencies, like the Forest Service and the Bureau of Land Management, can charge people for specialized amenities but are expressly prohibited from soliciting general access fees on their lands. Some free-market-minded groups, however, want that to change.

As the public lands continue to suffer financial neglect, as they get squeezed by belt-tightening measures, supporters of pay-to-play have seized the opportunity to promote their cause. They are calling on Congress to enable user fees on *all* federal lands and eliminate restrictions on the amount that federal agencies can make people pay. This idea was on display in March at a House Natural Resources Committee hearing on public lands infrastructure. During the hearing, Reed Watson, the executive director of the Property and Environment Research Center and a leading user fee aficionado, offered this take in his written testimony:

*To repair and maintain infrastructure on federal lands, the National Park Service and National Forest Service will have to become less dependent on congressional appropriations and more fiscally self-sufficient. That means relying on infrastructure users for a larger portion of their respective operating budgets.*

"Federal land managers should also have full discretion to charge entrance fees, recreation fees, and even tolls without congressional limitation," Watson later argued. "Giving them full authority to charge fees, set their own fee schedules, and retain those fees on site aligns the incentives of infrastructure managers and users."

All of this is a fancy way to say that our public lands should operate like theme parks, making people pay unregulated fees upon entry. And it would certainly bring in money: A 2015 Department of the Interior report, for instance, found that, by raising fees, the National Park Service alone could rake in tens of millions of dollars from visitors. But don't let the dollar signs deceive you. Though this pay-to-play vision has an alluring commonsense veneer, it is a bad—a very bad—idea. Here are a few reasons why:

1. User fees create an additional barrier to entry, making public lands further liable to charges of elitism.

One of the most effective ways to destroy a social democratic institution—whether public universities or public lands—is to make people pay for the institution's services out of pocket by imposing flat fees and other regressive payment schemes. And that is exactly what user fees are—a regressive payment scheme that would hit poor, working, and middle-class people hardest while leaving the wealthiest among us relatively unscathed. Such fees would make it harder for millions of Americans to gain access to the lands that belong to all of us. They would create more barriers for our cash-strapped fellow citizens who want to see this country's most beautiful landscapes. In doing so, they would further open up public lands to charges of elitism, potentially undercutting public support for this crucial institution.

2. User fees would encourage Congress to continue abdicating its responsibilities.

Public lands are a progressive institution. They were largely born out of the progressive movement in the early 20 century, and they rely on the proceeds from progressive taxation in order to function properly. It is Congress' responsibility to establish a taxation system that can garner enough revenue to cover federal infrastructure needs. It is Congress' responsibility to provide for the most important federal institutions in American life, including the national lands. In this era of right-wing austerity politics, of course, Congress has shirked its duties. It has indulged and embraced the ongoing tax revolt that America's wealthiest individuals and corporations have carried out for decades. We should not, however, accept this sad state of affairs. We should not let Congress off the hook by further shifting the burden of federal lands financing onto the backs of ordinary Americans in the form of more and higher user fees. What we need, instead, is a reinvigorated and multi-faceted progressive movement that can force financial concessions from the wealthiest among us and use those proceeds to pay for the unfunded needs that are plaguing our public lands and many other important institutions.

3. Like other free market solutions, user fees are a plutocratic policy.

Those who most vociferously promote user fees do not represent the interests of ordinary Americans. That's important to understand. Take PERC, for instance. The Property and Environment Research Center, which declined to comment for this column, has long led the call to impose higher user fees on public lands across the country. Whether testifying before Congress or publishing in national media outlets, its operatives want you to pay more in order to access the parks and forests that your tax dollars already support. But here's the rub: Like other groups working to dismantle our country's progressive conservation paradigm, PERC gets a nice influx of cash each year from conservative dark money funds tied to billionaires like Charles and David Koch and their allies in the fossil fuel industry and on the far right. Between 2010 and 2015 alone, the group received more than \$130,000 from

Donors Trust, a leading Koch-linked dark money fund based in Virginia. PERC's executive director, meanwhile, was an associate at the Charles G. Koch Charitable Foundation from 2008 to 2009. That should give you a sense of whose interests PERC represents.

Like millions of my fellow Millennials, I am tired of constantly being told we must accept less. I am tired of watching our public institutions crumble. I am tired of seeing the good things in my life, whether public lands or public education, become evermore unattainable for Americans of all stripes.

We should demand more. From Occupy Wall Street to the rise of Bernie Sanders to the recent blossoming of the Democratic Socialists of America, a young multi-racial progressive movement is taking shape in this country and calling for a visionary sort of politics that aims to rejuvenate our social democratic institutions. This movement wants free education at public universities, a \$15 minimum wage, and universal single-payer health care across the country. Fulfilling the egalitarian promise of public lands ought to be another plank in its platform. These lands, after all, are alive with possibility.

Rather than more and higher user fees, let's eliminate all such fees on the federal domain and offer free admission instead. Rather than privatizing campgrounds and other infrastructure, as Secretary of the Interior Ryan Zinke recently suggested, let's initiate a massive New Deal-style federal investment in public lands infrastructure that creates thousands of new jobs for young people who want to build trails and roads and bridges on and in our national parks and forests. To help make public lands more accessible, let's press the Park Service to create free or cheap shuttle services that can bring people from dense urban areas to nearby national parks where they can experience the many health and psychological benefits of time spent outdoors. As Edward Abbey once suggested, let's put park and forest rangers to good use offering free guiding services for uninitiated travelers who want to try their luck camping out in the backcountry. As the population of the country grows, let's create more and bigger parks, more and bigger forests, more and bigger wildlife refuges in both urban and rural areas.

We'll pay for it, of course, with higher taxes on our growing national clique of billionaires and multimillionaires and enormous corporations. We could also funnel hundreds of millions of dollars in federal oil and gas revenue directly to the Park Service and other agencies like it, as Theresa Pierno, the president of the National Parks Conservation Association, suggested in a recent op-ed in The Hill. If wealthy elites like the Koch brothers have enough money to pour many millions into think tanks and pressure groups and research outfits like PERC each year, they can certainly afford a much bigger tax bill. That, at least, would be a start.

There is so much we could do to make our public lands fulfill their promise, but instead we are forced to beat back the agents of austerity who aim to sabotage this great American institution. It's time to reframe the debate. Tax the rich and let's build some trails.